

THE LEARNING SOCIETY AS A KEY FOR DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

Drawing from the academic literature, this paper discusses the concept of the 'learning society' and traces back its development. ICT play major roles in the learning society, from providing the technical infrastructure to creating digital skills and competences for lifelong learning and networking. Learning societies engender collective learning and networking, and it is believed that collective learning is the only way to solve the collective problems of the 21st century and to address every social issue - such as development, poverty, peace, justice, and the environment. In this context, developmental implications become of major interest for policy makers, organisations and individuals. Various types of development such as human development, social development, and economic development are discussed in the light of the emergence of the learning society.

Keywords: learning society, development, lifelong learning, ICT

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SOCIETATEA CARE ÎNVATĂ, CHEIA DEZVOLTĂRII

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Rezumat

Pe baza unei atente analize a literaturii de specialitate, lucrarea discută conceptul de „societate care învață”, identificându-i evoluția în timp. Tehnologiile informaționale joacă un rol major în societatea care învață, de la asigurarea infrastructurii tehnice până la crearea deprinderilor și competențelor digitale pentru învățarea pe tot parcursul vieții și socializare. Societățile care învață stimulează astfel învățarea colectivă și socializarea, considerând că învățarea colectivă este singura modalitate de a rezolva problemele secolului XXI și de a viza aspecte sociale precum dezvoltarea, sărăcia, pacea, justiția și mediul. În acest context, implicațiile pentru dezvoltare capătă interes major pentru decidenții politici, organizații și indivizi. Diferitele tipuri de dezvoltare – umană, socială, economică – sunt discutate în ultima parte a lucrării prin lumina dezvoltării societății care învață.

Cuvinte cheie: societate care învață, dezvoltare, învățare pe tot parcursul vieții, tehnologii informaționale și de comunicare



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1. CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE LEARNING SOCIETY

In the evolving context of the knowledge economy, policy makers believe that the 'learning society', considered a means to achieve the knowledge economy – could be the answer to all the problems of the modern world, irrespective of their nature: economic, social or political. The concept was developed by the OECD and UNESCO as a new educational philosophy that acknowledges the role of education as the key to every nation's economic development. This new educational philosophy was defined by contrast with 'traditional education' by Maheu (1969) and Lengrand (1969). They proposed the concept of 'lifelong learning' instead of what was initially called 'éducation permanente', and associated learning with the entire lifespan of individuals:

'With regard to lifelong education, it is now a matter of common knowledge that this is the concept which explains the real meaning of modern education and which should inspire and sum up all efforts directed towards reform. Education is no longer confined to a particular age, that is, only a part of life; co-existent throughout its length, it represents an attitude and a dimension of life. It is an attitude enabling us to keep in touch with realities and not simply a preparation for work and responsibilities.' (UNESCO 1969)

Learning societies are thus societies enabling individuals to learn their entire life, from cradle to grave. Three major, profound and wide-ranging factors of upheaval have emerged and have transformed the context of economic activity and the way societies function in a radical and lasting manner, to require continuous learning from individuals as summarized by the European Commission (1995): the onset of the information society; the impact of the scientific and technological world; and the internationalisation of the economy. These factors are contributing towards the development of the learning society.

A learning society is a mix of different learning environments, encompassing: formal learning (in schools, training institutions, universities), non-formal learning (like structured on-the-job training), and informal learning (skills learned from family members or people in the community). Eurostat (2007) brought additional clarification on the terms: 'informal learning corresponds to self-learning which is not part of either formal nor non-formal education and training, by using one of the following ways: making use of printed material (e.g. professional books, magazines and the like); computer-based learning / training; online Internet-based web education; making use of educational broadcasting or offline computer-based (audio or videotapes); visiting facilities aimed at transmitting educational content (library, learning centres, etc.)'. They also stated that according to the definition of the European Commission, the intention / aim to learn is the critical point for distinguishing learning activities from non-learning activities (like cultural activities, sports activities etc) especially when discussing about the

informal learning. A learning society regards the actual process of learning as an 'activity, not a place' meaning that it takes learning outside of regular educational institutions, and is thus also decentralised and deregulated, a tenet of globalisation theory.

The conceptualisation of the learning society continued in the 1970s and 1980s when a clear sense that educational systems need to reinvent themselves to promote lifelong education and the learning society emerged. Books on the learning society, such as those by Hutchins (1968) and Husen (1974), were flagging up the change. Hutchins (1968) argued that given the ever-changing nature of states, particularly in business organisations, it wasn't possible for educational institutions to keep up, or even be expected to do so. Later, Husen (1974) noted 'education has to be viewed in a wider social context' and that the task of reforming education to meet the needs of a changing society has to reflect the following organising principles:

- Education is going to be a lifelong process;
- Education will not have fixed points of entry and cut-off exits. It will become a more continuous process within formal education and in its role within other functions of life;
- Education will take on a more informal character as it becomes accessible to more and more individuals. In addition to 'learning centres', facilities will be provided for learning at home and at the workplace, for example by the provision of computer terminals;
- Formal education will become more meaningful and relevant in its application;
- 'To an ever-increasing extent, the education system will become dependent on large supporting organisations or supporting systems ... to produce teaching aids, systems of information processing and multi-media instructional materials' (Huse, 1974, pp. 198-199).

The idea of the learning society become more sophisticated as the conceptual framework developed, but the core aspects envisioned by Hutchins (1968) and Husen (1974) maintained their validity.

Over time, various visions of the learning society have been outlined in the relevant literature and policies. Scholars believe that the learning society is the society of the future and that any contemporary society should transform itself into a learning society (Faure et al, 1972; European Commission, 1995; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997). However, although the necessity for a learning society was recognized by most developed countries as a policy agenda, it seems that the learning society is not adopted by individuals in itself. The learning society tends to be justified on instrumental grounds, mainly in reference to economic strength and civic cohesion (Coffield, 1997a).

These aims were synthesised by Coffield by 'an economized civic society', a society planned to 'ensure social integration as well as economic success' (Coffield, 1997b).

Considering the above, the following definition of the learning society can be used:

The learning society is a society that enhances learning for all. It addresses individual development, as well as social cohesion, through promoting lifelong learning for all its members, irrespective of age, gender, social status or work status.

The way the learning society is conceptualised in the scientific literature expresses two approaches: top-down and bottom-up. Firstly, the top-down approach is mainly found in policy documents and starts with specifying the group-level requirements, and individuals are expected to accept these requirements as 'the learning imperative' (Howard, 1990). The approach explicitly involves the subordination of learning activities to certain grand, supra-individual purposes, driven either by, as in most cases, economic determinism or civic demand (e.g. Raven, 2005; Welton, 2005). Collective learning in this case prevails over individual learning. Secondly, the bottom-up approach of the learning society starts from observing interactions among learning individuals as agents. Three aspects characterize the practices of the bottom-up learning society: lifelong learning, the individualization of learning, and learning beyond education (Su, 2007).

Wang et al (2006) summarized the key characteristics of a learning society as follows:

- It emphasizes lifelong learning and ensures the provision of suitable resources to satisfy all individuals' learning needs;
- It points out that learning is active and aims to enhance the promotion of knowledge, skills, and competence of individuals, as well as to encourage self-directed learners;
- It values the construction of learning organisations, including individuals, families, enterprises, communities, and governments, as an important base for a learning society;
- It views information technologies as effective tools for enlarging learning opportunities and making individual learning possible;
- It addresses the integration of lifelong learning resources among formal education and informal education institutions;
- Finally, it fosters public lifelong learning policies, such as lifelong learning stimulating policies, lifelong learning guarantee policies, etc., to encourage various kinds of learning activities and provide policy assurance for lifelong learning.

Developing the conceptual framework to a more contemporary timeframe, it is suggested that the requirement for a 'learning society' is a response to the broader issues of globalisation whereby richer countries have then become increasingly dependent on 'knowledge workers' rather than traditional manufacturing industries, and thus need their workforces to become adaptable, particularly in light of new technological developments which are seen as central to the knowledge economy (Jarvis, 2000). Later, Jarvis (2006) added four inter-linked features of the learning society that are important for this argument: the growth of the open society; globalisation; types of knowledge; instrumentalism / pragmatism; and learning.

The European Union has taken a clear lead in efforts to implement the learning society as a means to achieve the goal 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. In the White Paper 'Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society' (1995) the European Commission underlined the main lines of action at European level that have as objectives to: encourage the acquisition of new knowledge; bring school and the business sector closer together; combat exclusion; develop proficiency in three European languages; and treat capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis (European Commission, 1995).

Developmental issues become critical in the era of globalisation. The rapid social and economic changes deepen the disparities among regions of the world in terms of economic and social development. Bauman (1999) summarised a United Nations' Development Report thus:

- consumption has multiplied by a factor of six since 1950, but one billion people cannot even satisfy their most elementary needs;
- 60% of residents in developing countries have no basic social infrastructures, 33% no access to drinking water, 25% no accommodation worthy of the name and 20% no sanitary or medical services;
- the average income of 120 million people is less than \$1 per day;
- in the world's richest country (USA), 16.5% live in poverty, 20% of the adult population are illiterate; 13% have a life expectancy of shorter than 60 years;
- the world's three richest men have private assets greater than the combined national products of the 48 poorest countries;
- the fortunes of the 15 richest men exceeds the total produce of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa;

- 4% of the wealth of the world's richest 225 men would offer the poor of the world access to elementary medical and educational amenities as well as adequate nutrition.

At the same time, the perceived rapidity of these changes may not only generate disorientation among individuals, but also may present major challenges to societal adaptation. Societies must cope simultaneously with global economic competition, the demand for new skills and competences, the provision of opportunities for health services, well-being and quality of life, and the requirement to educate and train their population. The model of the learning society assures the development of all individuals through the acquisition of the needed skills and competences to become more adaptable and flexible to the dynamic external environment, seeing individuals as the pieces of a puzzle which interact together to form a more adaptable and flexible society to the changes brought by globalisation. Keeping in mind the comparison with the puzzle, we can easily imagine the two types of learning that occur in a learning society: individual learning and collective learning. Collective learning is the ongoing effect rooted in individuals' willingness to share their thoughts on what they learn, making it possible for others to collaborate with them in action. The accumulation of interactions between learning individuals becomes social capital for the learning society to develop.

In the attempt to conceptualise the learning society, Jarvis (2000) underlined the main attributes of a learning society. First, a learning society is futuristic, given by the tendency of the learning society to have a dependency on technological advances. Second, it is societal, attribute that is part of the broader conscious acknowledgement that is made by states and institutions that lifelong learning as part of the learning society exists specifically to contribute to the economic growth of a country and increase the democratic engagement of its citizens. Third, it is reflexive, attribute that requires learning societies to recognise not just the role of lifelong learning within the broader community, but also to enable it to be adaptable to changes, and flexible to specific individual needs. These changes may come about as a result of technological advances, legislative amendments or personal preferences of the individual undertaking the education. Fourth, a learning society is a global market, meaning that education becomes a commodity and that students or participants in the learning processes become consumers, able to choose the types of education that they would like, to suit their own personal preferences. This would be facilitated through technological advances that allow students to access learning resources (and qualifications) globally.

CISCO (2010) considered that the principles that characterise the learning society are designed to meet society's new demands for learning and to realize the learning potential of every part of society and every part of the globe. Thus, a learning society:

- Engenders a culture of learning throughout life;
- Aims to develop motivated, engaged learners who are prepared to conquer the unforeseen challenges of tomorrow as well as those of today;
- Takes learning to the learner, seeing learning as an activity, not a place.
- Believes that learning is for all, that no one should be excluded.
- Recognizes that people learn differently, and strives to meet those needs.
- Cultivates and embraces new learning providers, from the public, private, and NGO sectors.
- Develops new relationships and new networks between learners, providers (new and old), funders, and innovators.
- Provides the universal infrastructure they need to succeed - still physical but increasingly virtual.
- Supports systems of continuous innovation and feedback to develop knowledge of what works in which circumstances.

These principles confirm that a learning society is a society where all individuals engage in learning activities, are motivated to develop personally and professionally, and consider learning as an attitude in life being aware of their role in the development of the society. In this picture, many and diverse actors are involved: public, private and NGOs, offering the needed infrastructure for learning and innovation.

2. BUILDING LEARNING SOCIETIES

Having in mind the need for the development of a learning society, its conceptual delimitation and main features, as well as the principles that govern its functioning and the ways in which it promotes human and economic development, the main challenge that is now raised refers to how can we build a learning society, or how can we transform the current society into a learning one.

Actual experiences from all over the world together with theoretical views acknowledge several aspects that need to be developed. Most of them refer to ICT development and IT platforms, networking, community learning, and diversification and integration of learning resources. All these are combined under the umbrella of lifelong learning systems.

The construction of technical platforms to support lifelong learning systems appears to be the first step. ICT play major roles in the learning society: ICT within education should prepare students for the kinds

of learning that are needed in the learning society (formal, non-formal and informal); ICT should provide the technical capabilities for the development of learning societies and lifelong learning systems; ICT should also focus on competencies needed in the learning society like collaboration through networking and problem solving; ICT can extend the audience of the outcomes of learning, ensuring access and participation for all in the learning society. So far no study was conducted to identify and count the existent learning platforms, but most platforms were developed under projects financed by national or international bodies. The main objectives of learning platforms are generally to enhance discoverability of learning or e-learning content from heterogeneous sources, to develop e-learning standards, to promote best practices in e-learning content and systems, to encourage the sharing and development of content, and also to provide e-learning systems and tools to enable and support e-learning activities and processes for the purpose of lifelong learning.

Advanced network platforms have become the main medium for effective individual learning every time and everywhere. In this category fall mainly the e-campus or virtual campuses developed by higher education institutions or other providers of learning to respond to the need to widen access to their services and adopt more innovative approaches in general. Major initiatives that can be included here are those of The Open University (UK), Open University of China, The Open University of Japan, The Open University of Portugal UAb, Beijing Normal University (China); University of Ulster (Northern Ireland), Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics; Thompson Rivers University (Canada). More details can be found in Schreurs (ed) (2010).

The development and diversification of lifelong learning resources is a requirement for the learning society. Since the lifelong learning aims to cater the learning needs of a very diverse clientele in different learning environments, the learning resources shall meet the following basic characteristics: to be multi-level structured for different age groups covering the entire lifespan; to be diversified as different learners have different learning needs, varying from personal development to education for enjoyment; to be multi-sourced meaning the existence of a multitude of learning providers; and to be multi-delivered meaning the existence of a multitude of delivery forms and formats. The integration of all learning resources can be done with the use of platforms.

In the learning society all organisations begin to assume educational roles. New roles are ascribed to existing players like governments, schools, HEIs, and new roles are assumed by new players. Governments have one of the most important roles in the creation of learning societies. According to CISCO (2010) they should step back from being a near monopoly provider of education and to focus on six roles that remain fundamentally in the public interest: convening the new and unusual coalition

necessary to govern the learning society; articulating the goals and valued outcomes for the learning society, and acting as champion of them; evaluating and assessing how far those goals have been met; helping to knit the system together, as learning is distributed between institutions, and through communities; providing the all-important conceptual framework for what is being achieved; protecting and promoting the interests of the underprivileged and those least likely to participate in the learning society; embracing non-traditional providers and using regulation, deregulation, and funding to spur disruptive innovation. Educational institutions (schools and HEIs) need to see themselves having a lifelong relationship with the learner, to think beyond the age-bound constraints that they currently operate within and to consider the school premises as a multipurpose entity. Buildings need to be designed with this in mind, with particular attention paid to both physical and virtual security systems.

Taking learning out of the classrooms implies also the involvement of new players in providing education: public, private, third-sector organisations and even individuals. The private sector has a new role in the learning society, that of supporting employees in engaging in learning activities, in various forms ranging from the financial aid and company paid studies to study leave or days-off for learning activities. Partnerships between public and private enterprises shall aim to expand the scope of education to allow for more powerful educational learning experiences inside and outside of traditional institutions. These partnerships are seen to increase supplement funding levels as well as open traditional institutions to the new technologies and pedagogies (Spring, 2009). A second category of new actors in the learning society is that of social innovators. Christensen et al (2009) refer to 'catalyst innovators for social change' that have the following five qualities: 1. they create systemic social change through scaling and replication; 2. they meet a need that is either over-served (because the existing solution is more complex than many people require) or not served at all; 3. they offer products and services that are simpler and less costly than existing alternatives and may be perceived as having a lower level of performance, but users consider them to be good enough; 4. they generate resources, such as donations, grants, volunteer manpower, or intellectual capital, in ways that are initially unattractive to incumbent competitors. A third category of new actors in the learning society is represented by the social investors that play an important role in providing capital to innovators in the learning society. According to CISCO (2010), they must take the higher risks that governments will not be prepared to take. Frequently, they will function as an important broker - bringing together the public, private, and third sectors.

3. DEVELOPMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNING SOCIETIES

The educational philosophy of learning societies - advocated by UNESCO and OECD as shown in previous chapter, positions education and learning as the keys to development. Further clarifications on the concept of 'development' will clarify the role of learning. The concept of 'development' refers to a process of evolution, progress or amelioration that can be attributed to every single aspect or object. Development is a complex concept with many facets. Attempts to define the concept of 'development' lead to more specific terms like 'economic development', 'sustainable development', 'human development' and very many others. Figure 1 tries to portray the most important facets of development, which at their turn, incorporate many other aspects related to development.

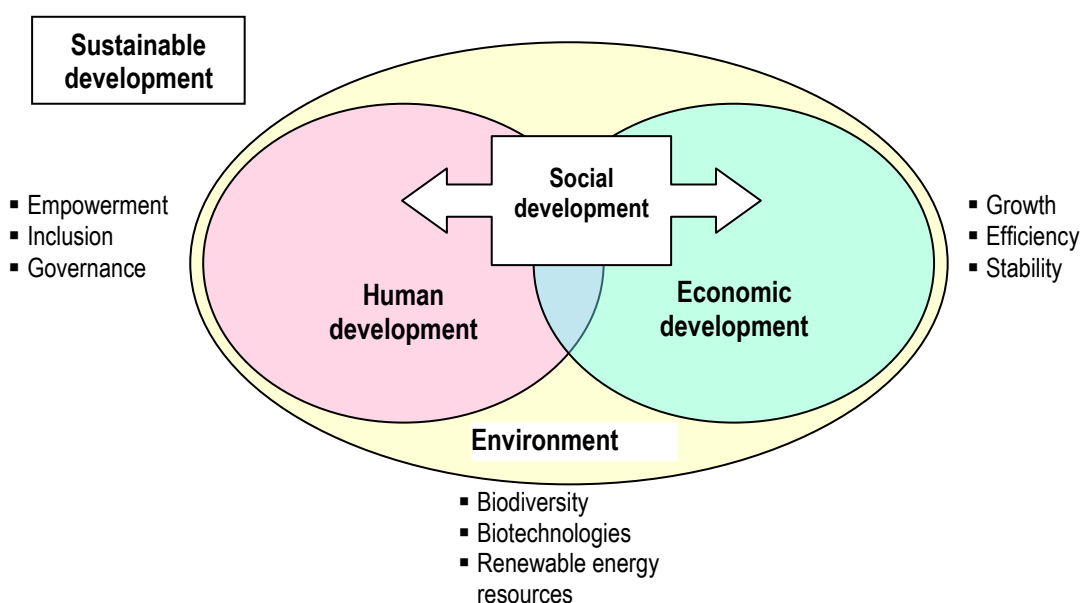


FIGURE 1 - FACETS OF DEVELOPMENT

Source: Author's conceptualisation

Human development refers to the way that people change over time (Thomas, 2001). Learning is a vital tool for human development. The energy and aspiration of people who seek development form the motive force that drives the development process. The level of people's education, the intensity of their aspiration and energies, the quality of their attitudes and values, skills and information decide the extent and pace of development. All these factors come into play whether it is the development of the individual, family, community or nation or even the whole world (Jacobs and Asokan, 1999). Learning provides people with skills, competences and knowledge, bringing about an increase of the intellectual capital and creativity.

This is closely connected with innovation and entrepreneurship which positively impact economic possibilities, triggering economic development and growth, both at micro and macro levels. For

example, technical knowledge for the innovation of products and services, market knowledge for understanding changes in consumer choices and tastes, financial knowledge to measure the inputs and outputs of production processes and more recently human knowledge in the form of skills and creativity, are all codified within an economic model that seeks financial returns (Lever, 2002). Thus, the economic development is linked to human development, which encompasses, among other things, health and education. These factors are, however, closely related to economic growth so that development and growth often go hand in hand. The economic development is reflected in the standard of living of the population and in the indices measuring the quality of life.

Learning is a social process rather than strictly a function of individual effort and intelligence. Learners co-construct meaning in dialogue with parents, peers, and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Collaborative and cooperative group instructions are effective techniques that foster cognitive and social development. The relationship between learning and social development was studied by many scholars (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). The social learning theory proposed by Bandura (1977) argues that people can learn new information and behaviours by watching other people. Known as observational learning (or modelling), this type of learning can be used to explain a wide variety of behaviours. Vygotsky's social development theory (1978) considers that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development through learning. He defined 'the more knowledgeable other' focusing on the connections between people and the socio-cultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences. 'The more knowledgeable other' (MKO) refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. The MKO is normally thought of as being a teacher, coach, or older adult, but the MKO could also be peers, a younger person, or even computers.

Technological development is seen as central to the learning society. The rapid technological development and the fast transfer of technologies in the globalised world changed the nature of work and the skills required in almost every occupation. To continuously update and upgrade their skills, competences and knowledge people need to engage in lifelong learning activities. Ensuring lifelong learning for all in the learning society becomes a requirement so as to promote socio-economic development and build a harmonious society.

Meeting the needs of human and economic development should envisage a certain pattern of resource use to preserve the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come. Called sustainable development by the Brundtland Commission (United Nations, 1987), the concept ties together the concerns for the carrying capacity of natural systems with the social

challenges facing humanity. The ecological environment sets constraints and opportunities for all human activities which in turn transform the environment into something socially useful. Environmental preservation and environmental development are rooted in learning, research and innovation. The concept of environmental education is now widespread in national educational policies, curriculum documents, curriculum development initiatives, and conservation strategies (Rickinson, 2001).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The learning society envisages learning for all; it needs a plenitude and variety of learning providers - public, private, and third sector organizations and individuals that provide content, learning opportunities, and instruction to learners of all ages. Making learning easy to access is fundamental to encouraging the involvement in learning activities, and means providing seamless, high-quality, low-cost (and at times no-cost) connectivity at home, at work, on the move, and in public spaces. Existing educational institutions need to keep up with the rapid development of technologies and evolutions on the labour market, to continuously innovate and upgrade curricula. They should work with community groups and services providers to develop new delivery models that help ensure access for all. Individuals of all ages must be prepared to invest more time and money in learning, and to bear their share of the burden for learning that has private (personal and professional) benefits. Employers and employees unions should encourage their staff, members, and communities to take advantage of learning opportunities, and provide funding and reward for doing so.

An important aspect of this learning economy refers to the conditions which facilitate interactive learning in various forms. The learning society is often described as a socio-economy, where the focus is on relational, social, and contextual aspects of economical behaviour.

Learning, research and innovation provide the basis for development, in all its aspects: human, social, or economic. The development of the economy and citizenship for society as a whole shall be perceived by individuals not as aims but as conditions that allow their learning to be sustained. The most important driving force within this perspective on development is consequently the ability to learn something new, couple the new with the old to identify new resources, the development of new products and services and improvements of existing products, processes, and ways of organizing. The learning society assures the development of all individuals through the acquisition of the needed skills and competences to become more adaptable and flexible to the dynamic external environment, seeing individuals as the pieces of a puzzle which interact together to form a more adaptable and flexible society to the changes brought by globalisation.

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